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PRESBYTERIANISM

AND

SLAVERY.

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PITTSBURGH, 1836.

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Special Collections

The question of Slavery being before the General Assembly of 1836, on petition from many members of the church that the Assembly would bear their testimony against the practice of slaveholding as a SIN, it has been thought proper to reprint the testimonies and acts of former Assemblies on the same subject, from the official Minutes, without note or comment.

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1836

PRESBYTERIANISM, &c.

I. IN THE YEAR 1787.

In 1787 the "Synod of New York and Philadelphia," which then represented the whole body of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, adopted the following resolutions on the subject of slavery :—

The Synod, taking into consideration the overture concerning slavery transmitted by the committee of overtures, came to the following judgment: The Synod of New York and Philadelphia do highly approve of the general principles in favour of universal liberty that prevail in America, and the interest which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery. Yet in as much as men introduced from a servile state to a participation of all the privileges of civil society, without a proper education, and without previous habits of industry, may be, in many respects, dangerous to the community; therefore they earnestly recommend it to all the members belonging to their communion, to give those persons who are at present held in servitude such good education as to prepare them for the better enjoyment of freedom: and they moreover recommend that masters, wherever they find servants disposed to make a just improvement of the privilege, would give them a peculium, or grant them sufficient time and sufficient means of procuring their own liberty at a moderate rate; that thereby they may be brought into society with those habits of industry that may render them useful citizens: and, finally, they recommend it to all their people to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interests and the state of civil society in the countries where they live, to procure the final abolition of slavery in America.

II. IN THE YEAR 1793.

In 1793 the General Assembly republished those resolutions in their printed minutes for that year.

III. IN THE YEAR 1795.

In 1795 the following record occurs, viz.—

"A serious and conscientious person, a member of a Presbyterian congregation, who views the slavery of the negroes as a moral evil, highly offensive to God, and injurious to the interests of the gospel, lives under the ministry of a person, or amongst a society of people, who concur with him in sentiment upon general principles, yet, for particular reasons, hold slaves, and tolerate the practice in others. Ought the former of these persons, under the impressions and cir-

cumstances above described, to hold christian communion with the latter?"

Whereupon, after due deliberation, it was *Resolved*, That as the same difference of opinion with respect to slavery takes place in sundry other parts of the Presbyterian Church, notwithstanding which they strive together in charity and peace, according to the doctrine and practice of the Apostles; it is hereby recommended to all conscientious persons, and especially to those whom it immediately respects, to do the same. At the same time the General Assembly do assure all the churches under their care that they view with the deepest concern any vestiges of slavery which may exist in our country, and refer to the Records of the General Assembly, published at different times, * * * with which they trust every conscientious person will be fully satisfied.

IV. IN THE YEAR 1815.

In 1815 a petition came up from some elders who entertained conscientious scruples on the subject of holding slaves; also an overture from the Synod of Ohio concerning the buying and selling of slaves; both of which were referred to a committee, whose report, as amended and adopted, is as follows:—

The General Assembly have repeatedly declared their cordial approbation of those principles of civil liberty which appear to be recognized by the federal and state governments in these United States. They have expressed their regret that the slavery of the Africans, and of their descendants, still continues in so many places, and *EVEN among those within the pale of the church*; and have urged the Presbyteries under their care to adopt such measures as will secure, at least to the rising generation of slaves, within the bounds of the church, a religious education, that they may be prepared for the exercise and enjoyment of liberty, when God, in his providence, may open a door for their emancipation.

The committee then refer to the former minutes of 1787, '93, and '95.

With regard to the second question, the Assembly observes, that although in some sections of our country, under certain circumstances, the transfer of slaves may be unavoidable, they consider the buying and selling of slaves, by way of traffic, and all undue severity in the management of them, as inconsistent with the spirit of the gospel; and they recommend it to the presbyteries and sessions under their care to make use of all prudent measures to prevent such shameful and unrighteous conduct.

V. IN THE YEAR 1816.

In 1816 an inquiry was proposed by the Presbytery of Philadelphia relative to the notes found in the book containing the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. The inquiry was referred to a committee, who reported that "the book was first published with nothing but the simple text, without any scripture proofs, or any notes, of any description whatever." And "not a single note in the book has been added to or made a part of the constitution of the church." "When a

second edition of the standards of our church was needed, it was thought by the General Assembly that it would be of great use in itself, highly agreeable to the members of our church generally, as well as conformable to the example of the church of Scotland, from which we derived our origin, if the scripture proofs were added." A committee was appointed to prepare the proofs. The work of the committee was the following year referred to another committee, on whose report the proofs and notes were approved by the Assembly, and directed to be printed. These notes then are explanations of some of the principles of the Presbyterian Church given by the General Assembly, and which the General Assembly may modify, or altogether exclude, at their pleasure, whereas the articles of the constitution must govern the Assembly themselves. It was therefore

Resolved, That as it belongs to the General Assembly to give direction in regard to the notes which accompany the constitution, of which they are the supreme judicatory, this assembly express it as their opinion, that, in printing future editions of the constitution of this church, the parenthesis in the note on this part of the form of government which defines a synod, and which is expressed in these words, 'since a synod is only a larger presbytery,' be omitted, as well as the note connected with the scripture proofs in answer to the question in the Larger Catechism, What is forbidden in the eighth commandment? in which the nature of the crime of man-stealing and slavery is dilated upon.

In regard to this last omission, the Assembly think proper to declare, that in directing it they are influenced by far other motives than *any desire to favour slavery*, or to retard the extinction of that mournful evil AS SPEEDILY as may consist with the happiness of all concerned.

THE OMITTED NOTE

Appended to the 142d question of the Larger Catechism:—

1 Tim. i. 10. The law is made for man-stealing. This crime among the Jews exposed the perpetrators of it to capital punishment, Exodus xxi. 16; and the apostle here classes them with sinners of the first rank. The word he uses, in its original import, comprehends all who are concerned in bringing any of the human race into slavery, or retaining them in it. *Hominum fures, qui servos vel liberos abducant, retinent, vendunt, vel emunt*. Stealers of men are all those who bring off slaves or freemen, and keep, sell, or buy them. To steal freemen, says Grotius, "is the highest kind of theft. In other instances we only steal human property; but when we steal or retain men in slavery, we seize those who, in common with ourselves, are constituted, by the original grant, lords of the creation. Gen. i. 28.

In the same year, 1816, another question was brought up, viz.—"Ought baptism, on the profession and promise of the master, to be administered to the children of slaves?" and the following minute was adopted:—

"1st. That it is the duty of masters who are members of the church to present the children of parents in servitude to the ordinance of baptism, provided they are in a situation to train them up in the

nurture and admonition of the Lord, thus securing to them the rich advantages which the gospel provides.

"2d. That it is the duty of Christ's ministers to inculcate this doctrine, and to baptize all children of this description when presented to them by their masters."

VI. IN THE YEAR 1818.

In the year 1818 the subject came up again, and we have what is called in the Digest

A full expression of the Assembly's views of Slavery in 1818.

The committee to which was referred the resolution on the subject of selling a slave, a member of the church, and which was directed to prepare a report to be adopted by the Assembly, expressing their opinion in general on the subject of slavery, reported; and their report being read, was *unanimously* adopted, and referred to the same committee for publication.

It is as follows: *viz.*

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church having taken into consideration the subject of SLAVERY, think proper to make known their sentiments upon it to the churches and people under their care.

We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbour as ourselves; and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ, which enjoin that, "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system—it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings, in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbours and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity. Such are some of the consequences of slavery,—consequences not imaginary—but which connect themselves with its very existence. The evils to which the slave is *always* exposed, often take place in fact, and in their very worst degree and form; and where all of them do not take place, as we rejoice to say that in many instances, through the influence of the principles of humanity and religion on the minds of masters, they do not—still the slave is deprived of his natural right, degraded as a human being, and exposed to the danger of passing into the hands of a master who may inflict upon him all the hardships and injuries which inhumanity and avarice may suggest.

From this view of the consequences resulting from the practice into

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which christian people have most inconsistently fallen, of enslaving a portion of their *brethren* of mankind—for “God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth”—it is manifestly the duty of all christians who enjoy the light of the present day, when the inconsistency of slavery, both with the dictates of humanity and religion, has been demonstrated, and is generally seen and acknowledged, to use their honest, earnest, and unwearied endeavours, to correct the errors of former times, and as speedily as possible, to efface this blot on our holy religion, and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout christendom, and if possible throughout the world.

We rejoice that the church to which we belong commenced as early as any other in this country the good work of endeavouring to put an end to slavery,* and that in the same work, many of its members have ever since been, and now are, among the most active, vigorous, and efficient labourers. We do, indeed, tenderly sympathize with those portions of our church and our country, where the evil of slavery has been entailed upon them; where a *great*, and *the most virtuous part of the community* abhor slavery, and wish its extermination, as sincerely as any others—but where the number of slaves, their ignorance, and their vicious habits generally, render an immediate and universal emancipation inconsistent, alike, with the safety and happiness of the master and the slave. With those who are thus circumstanced, we repeat that we tenderly sympathize.—At the same time, we earnestly exhort them to continue, and, if possible, to increase their exertions to effect a total abolition of slavery.—We exhort them to suffer no greater delay to take place in this most interesting concern, than a regard to the public welfare *truly* and *indispensably* demands.

As our country has inflicted a most grievous injury on the unhappy Africans, by bringing them into slavery, we cannot, indeed, urge that we should add a second injury to the first, by emancipating them in such manner as that they will be likely to destroy themselves or others. But we do think, that our country ought to be governed in this matter by no other consideration than an honest and impartial regard to the happiness of the injured party; uninfluenced by the expense or inconvenience which such a regard may involve. We therefore warn all who belong to our denomination of christians against unduly extending this plea of necessity; against making it a cover for the love and practice of slavery, or a pretence for not using efforts that are lawful and practicable to extinguish the evil.

And we, at the same time, exhort others to forbear harsh censures, and uncharitable reflections on their brethren, who unhappily live among slaves, whom they cannot immediately set free; but who, at the same time, are really using all their influence, and all their endeavours, to bring them into a state of freedom, as soon as a door for it can be safely opened.

* In a note the Assembly republished the minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia on this subject, which the reader may find in sect. 1, preceding.

Having thus expressed our views of slavery, and of the duty indispensably incumbent on all christians to labour for its complete extinction, we proceed to recommend—(and we do it with all the earnestness and solemnity which this momentous subject demands)—a particular attention to the following points.

We recommend to all our people to patronize and encourage the society, lately formed, for colonizing in Africa, the land of their ancestors, the free people of colour in our country. We hope that much good may result from the plans and efforts of this society. And while we exceedingly rejoice to have witnessed its origin and organization among the *holders of slaves*, as giving an unequivocal pledge of their desire to deliver themselves and their country from the calamity of slavery, we hope that those portions of the American Union, whose inhabitants are, by a gracious providence, more favourably circumstanced, will cordially, and liberally, and earnestly co-operate with their brethren in bringing about the great end contemplated.

We recommend to all the members of our religious denomination, not only to permit, but to facilitate and encourage the instruction of their slaves in the principles and duties of the christian religion, by granting them liberty to attend on the preaching of the gospel, when they have the opportunity; by favouring the instruction of them in Sabbath-schools, wherever those schools can be formed; and by giving them all other proper advantages for acquiring the knowledge of their duty both to God and man. We are perfectly satisfied, that, as it is incumbent on all christians to communicate religious instruction to those who are under their authority, so the doing of this in the case before us, so far from operating, as some have apprehended that it might, as an excitement to insubordination and insurrection, would, on the contrary, operate as the most powerful means for the prevention of those evils.

We enjoin it on all Church Sessions and Presbyteries, under the care of this Assembly, to discountenance, and, as far as possible, to prevent, all cruelty of whatever kind in the treatment of slaves; especially the cruelty of separating husband and wife, parents and children; and that which consists in selling slaves to those who will either themselves deprive these unhappy people of the blessings of the gospel, or who will transport them to places where the gospel is not proclaimed, or where it is forbidden to slaves to attend upon its institutions.—The manifest violation or disregard of the injunction here given, in its true spirit and intention, ought to be considered as just ground for the discipline and censures of the church.—And if it shall ever happen that a christian professor, in our communion, shall sell a slave who is also in communion and good standing with our church, contrary to his or her will, and inclination, it ought immediately to claim the particular attention of the proper church judicature; and unless there be such peculiar circumstances attending the case as can but seldom happen, it ought to be followed, without delay, by a suspension of the offender from all the privileges of the church, till he repent, and make all the reparation in his power to the injured party.